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AUTHOR Auerbach, Stephen M.; Gackenbach, Jayne I.
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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the effects of individual differences in attitudes toward sex roles on the learning of neutral material associated with situations differing in rated sex-role appropriateness. It was hypothesized that if sexism is a valid dimension as measured in this study, then "sexists" would learn nonsense syllables associated with scenes rated "role appropriate" faster than those rated "role inappropriate," since the latter scenes would be expected to be somewhat aversive for them. Forty-eight female and 44 male subjects were presented two separate sets of eight nonsense syllables paired with chosen pictures which differed in role appropriateness. The results revealed that for all subjects inappropriate scenes were learned faster than appropriate scenes, and scenes depicting females were learned faster than those depicting males. Among females, sexist subjects took a slightly longer time to learn syllables associated with appropriate scenes than those associated with inappropriate scenes compared to nonsexists. Among males, nonsexists learned syllables paired with inappropriate scenes faster than those paired with appropriate scenes, while sexists showed relatively little difference in learning rates as a function of appropriateness. (SW)

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The Effects of Individual Differences in Sexism and Sex on Learning of Nonsense Syllables Paired with Pictured Situations Differing in Sex-Role Appropriateness

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Stephen M. Auerbach and Jayne I. Gackenbach

Virginia Commonwealth University

With the recent emergence of the women's liberation movement there has been increasing interest in the study of attitudes towards women and the changing nature of sex roles. The latter area is of particular interest to those concerned with the inhibiting effects that traditional sex-role stereotyping has on freedom of movement for both men and women within our society. The present investigation represents an exploratory empirical investigation of the attitudinal dimension sexism. Specifically, this study evaluated the effects of individual differences in attitudes toward sex roles on the learning of neutral material associated with situations differing in rated sex-role appropriateness. It was hypothesized that if sexism is a valid dimension as measured in this study, then "sexists" (i.e., those individuals who have a rigid conception of what types of activities are or are not sex role appropriate for males or females) would learn nonsense syllables associated with scenes rated "role appropriate" faster than those rated "role inappropriate" since those latter scenes would be expected to be somewhat aversive for them. "Nonsexists" (those individuals who are not concerned with the role appropriateness of activities based on sex), on the other hand, would not differ in their learning rates of appropriate and inappropriate scenes.

CS 001 482

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Ratings of Scenes (Phase I)

Sixty specially devised photographs of a man or a woman engaged in activities thought to differ in sex-role appropriateness were rated for appropriateness by a sample of 50 male and female psychology students at New Mexico State University. On the basis of these ratings 6 appropriate, 6 inappropriate, and 4 neutral scenes were chosen to be used in a subsequent learning task (because of methodological errors only appropriate and inappropriate scenes were used in subsequent statistical analyses).

Learning Task

Forty-eight female and 44 male Ss were presented nonsense syllables paired with chosen pictures which differed in role appropriateness. These were presented in 2 separate sets of 8 photograph-nonsense syllable pairs each. Ss were run in groups of four. The criterion for completion of the paired associate learning task was 2 successive errorless test trials. Measures of sexism were obtained on each S by administration of the Bentler Traditional Sex-Role Standards Questionnaire (Ellis and Bentler, 1973) after completion of the final learning trial. After the Bentler, Ss were additionally asked to rate each photograph according to sex-role appropriateness and according to the degree of anxiety it aroused in them.

Results

The data were evaluated in an ANOVA in which the dependent variable was number of learning trials to criterion. The between-Ss independent variables were sex of S (M or F), sexism of S (based on a median split of Bentler scores), and the within-Ss variables were appropriateness of depicted scenes (based on Phase I ratings), and sex of subject depicted in the scenes (half male and half female).

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Significant main effects were obtained for appropriateness ($F = 49.44$, $df = 1/84$, $p < .001$) and sex of subject ($F = 22.75$, $df = 1/84$, $p < .01$) depicted in scenes. That is, for all Ss, inappropriate scenes were learned faster than appropriate scenes and scenes depicting females were learned faster than those depicting males. Additionally, a significant interaction was obtained between sex of S, sexism level of S, and appropriateness ($F = 5.95$, $df = 1/84$, $p < .05$). This interaction which is depicted in Figure 1, did not confirm the main hypothesis of the study. It may be noted that among females, sexist Ss took a slightly

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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relatively longer time to learn syllables associated with appropriate scenes than those associated with inappropriate scenes compared to nonsexists; the situation with males was however, somewhat different. Among males, contrary to expectation, nonsexists learned syllables paired with inappropriate scenes faster than those paired with appropriate scenes while sexists showed relatively little difference in learning rates as a function of appropriateness. These findings will be discussed in terms of attitudinal and motivational variables in the four groups of Ss (male and female sexists and nonsexists) which may have accounted for differential learning rates.

It was additionally found that scores on the Bentler scale were highly negatively correlated with the variance of role appropriateness ratings of the photographed activities ($r = -.47$, $p < .0001$).

This relationship which was especially marked among nonsexist Ss ($r = -.62$) but much less so among sexist Ss ($r = -.13$), indicated that nonsexists tend to see most activities in relatively the same way in terms of role appropriateness

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whereas sexists are more judgmental and see different activities as being differentially appropriate or inappropriate for individuals of a given sex to engage in. These latter findings will be discussed in terms of problems in measuring sexism using face valid self-report measures such as the Bentler which are prone to response sets vs. the possibility of developing less obvious more unobtrusive measures of this trait.

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Reference

Ellis, L. S. and Bentler, P. M. Traditional sex determined role standards and sex stereotypes. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, 25, 28-34.

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Figure 1. Number of learning trials to criterion as a function of appropriateness of photographed activities associated with nonsense syllables, sexism of S, and sex of S.